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THE BASIC TRUTHS OF
VEDIC RELIGION BY
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THE BASIC TRUTHS OF VEDIC RELIGION

By emphasising the unity of all the great religions of the world as derived from a common source, Theosophy has led its students to an enquiry into the great fundamental truths underlying each religious system. In the pursuit of this enquiry, the Hindū Theosophist, seeking for the basic truths of Hindūism, turns his attention to the Vedas, in which its foundations are said to lie. This study has so far proved very illuminative; among other things, it has thrown light on many of the puzzling socio-religious problems which have been engaging the serious attention of the most enlightened sections of the community.

Vedic religion, really, is the basis of Hindūism. Each sect of Hindūism professes to be its true exponent; but the fundamental truths of religion are laid down in the Veda, and on the basis of this teaching, each religious sect formulates a detailed system of worship, and each school of philosophy gives a rational explanation of the observed facts and laws of nature.

For a proper understanding of the relation of Vedic religion to Hindūism, it is necessary to comprehend the full and precise import of the term Vedic religion—*Vaidika-Dharma* in Saṁskṛt. *Vaidika-Dharma* means the Dharma taught in the Veda. Dharma is defined as a body of laws laid down by authority, such laws as are beyond the understanding of man's unaided intellect in its present stage of development; and the Veda is said to be the authority which can lay down Dharma. Thus the Vedic religion is a comprehensive term embracing all truths and laws which man's intellect cannot discover by itself, but which man must know if he would make any further progress.

The two terms *Veḍa* and *Dharma* require further explanation. *Veḍa* comes from the root *Viḍ* which means *to know* as well as *to attain* ; so that *Veḍa* means knowledge of that thing which to know is to attain. Such a thing is the Self, the *Ātman*, to attain which one has only to know it. This Self is always within man as well as in the universe without ; so that the *Ātman* being known, all is known ; the *Ātman* being attained all is attained, as the scriptures say :

आत्मलाभात् परं विद्यते. Than the gain of the Self, nothing is greater (*Āpastamba-Dharma Sūtra*, 1-22-2).

अयमात्मा ब्रह्म. This, the Self, is Brahman (*Māṇḍūkya-Upaniṣat*).

ब्रह्म वेद ब्रह्मैव भवति. He knows Brahman, he becomes Brahman Himself (*Muṇḍaka-Upaniṣat*).

ब्रह्मविदाप्नोति परम्. The Knower of Brahman attains the Supreme (*Taittirīya-Upaniṣat*).

Thus *Veḍa* means Divine Wisdom, direct knowledge of God, perfect realisation of the One Self that is in man and in the universe, a knowledge of the nature, purposes, and activities of the Divine Lord of the universe—a knowledge which comprehends the working of the whole universe, the whole evolutionary law.

DHARMA, ETERNAL AND TEMPORARY

Vedic *Dharma* is the rule of life based on that knowledge. The word *Dharma* itself means all this. It is derived from the root *ḍhr* which means *to support, to maintain*. *Dharma* is the way that the world is maintained, the law of world-progress in the divine scheme of evolution. In fact it is said that the Divine Lord Himself represents the Eternal Law (*Shāshvata-Dharma*) which makes for divine bliss (*Gītā*, xiv, 27), and that the Divine Lord maintains the evolutionary progress of the universe, ruling the material universe by His spiritual power. (*Ibid.* vii, 5). Thus *Dharma* may be explained as the expression of the divine will as it is manifested in the world-evolution. So, the *Dharma* laid down in the *Veḍa* for man is the law of human progress in the divine scheme of the universe, showing

the life which man should lead for the attainment of the highest goal of human evolution, for the realisation of the divine Self in man. अयं तु परमो धर्मो यद्योगेनात्मदर्शनम्. This, the seeing of the Self by Yoga is the highest Dharma (*Yājñavalkya-Smṛti*, 1-8). Technically, Vedic Dharma may be explained as the law of human progress, of human evolution onward from the point of spiritual progress reached by the Indo-Āryan, to whom the Vedic Dharma was primarily taught. As concerning the further steps on the path of progress, the laws laid down in the Veda are beyond the ken of man's senses and intellect. These laws of Dharma deal with the present, with facts of sensuous experience and the inferences based thereon, whereas the Vedic laws relate to the attainment of what lies in the womb of the far future, beyond the cognisance of the senses and the intellect.

Dharma has a wider signification in common parlance. It denotes all rules of life laid down by authority—not only those which are the subject-matter of Revelation (Shruti) and properly called Dharma, but also the rules which are based on sensuous experience and inference (Smṛti), which the more advanced members in a community frame for its guidance in the light of their own experience, or of the supersensuous truths revealed by higher beings for their guidance. These two kinds of rules must be distinguished from each other; they form the invariable and the variable elements in modern Hindūism, forming the subject-matter, respectively, of the Shruti and the Smṛti properly so-called. They must, however, be distinguished not with reference to the modern texts which lay them down under the names of Shruti and Smṛti, but with reference to the nature of the rules themselves. If a rule of life be based on a knowledge of supersensuous matters, then the law comes from a higher authority, and man should not change it in the light of his own sensuous experience. If, on the other hand, a law is based on man's sensuous experience, it may be altered in the light of his further knowledge on the subject. A man-made law may take the form of a by-law devised by man in the execution of a command laid down in the Shruti. Such a

rule may be altered in the light of a better understanding of the original revealed law. This latter class consists of rules which should change with the progress of man. They are temporary adjustments of fundamental life-principles, and change with man's evolving faculties and changing environments.

The same distinction holds good as to the supersensuous facts revealed in the Veda properly so called, and the philosophical systems which man's intellect has evolved by way of explanation of the truths revealed in the Veda in the light of his own sensuous experience and reason. The truths revealed in the Veda are eternal verities; whereas the founder of one philosophical school who tries to explain those truths in the light of his own experience and reason may differ from the founders of other schools, as each explains the truths from his own point of view and views change with the evolution of the intellect and the senses.

This distinction should always be borne in mind and acted upon in everyday life. We must be prepared to change the existing rules of practical life in accordance with the eternal laws when further experience and knowledge prove them defective. Because of their failure in this respect the religious and social institutions of the Hindūs have become rigid. The long-continued influence of personal interest and class-pride have become stumbling blocks in the way of progress. This statement will be made clear in the sequel.

SACRIFICE THE FIRST DHARMA

With these few words as to the relation between the Vedic religion and modern Hindūism I proceed to deal with the basic truths of the Vedic religion. The first and foremost Dharma taught in the Veda is Yajña or Sacrifice, such as the Devas and Ṛṣhis performed in the beginning in order to bring into existence the sentient and insentient beings of the world.

यज्ञेन यज्ञमयजन्त देवाः, तानि धर्माणि प्रथमान्यासन्.

"Devas sacrificed the Sacrifice (the Primordial Being in whom they were embodied): they (acts of sacrifice) have become the first (or typical) Dharmas" (*Puruṣa-Sūkṭa*). This primordial Yajña is an act of self-sacrifice on the part

of the Puruṣha, the Primal Being, the Prajāpati, who, dwelling in the region of immortality, has sacrificed Himself, given a portion of Himself in order to provide bodies, vitality and sentiency for the further evolution of the undeveloped and partially developed souls in the universe. It is this self-sacrifice, the sacrifice of one's self and one's possessions acquired in the whole life-evolution, which is connoted by the word *Yajña*. It constitutes the primary Dharma, which is fully embodied in the Divine Lord of the universe, maintaining the whole world and its ever progressive evolution. It is by His continual sacrifice that the evolution of the world is maintained. Self-sacrifice is the very being and nature of the Deity: यज्ञो वै विष्णुः

If we bear in mind this aspect of the Divine Being, we shall be able to understand fully the meaning of the primary commandment of Veda, that rule of life which every religion gives, which every man should obey if he would attain immortality. This command (*Vājasaneyī-Samhitā*, 4-8) runs as follow :

विश्वो देवस्य नेतुर्मर्तो बुरीत सख्यम्

विश्वोऽराय इषुध्यति युमं वृणीत पुष्यसे स्वाहा ॥

“Let every mortal seek the Divine Lord's fellowship. Every one wishes for power; for its attainment let him seek the Lord's glory.”

Such is the supreme, all-comprehensive rule of life laid down in the Veda for the mortal who wishes to attain immortality. This life is open to all who realise the perishable nature of earthly life and seek to attain immortality. The seeker for immortality can achieve it by living and working in fellowship with the Divine Lord. In the past, man has been working for his own limited personal self as distinguished from others. But he has now realised the perishability of all personal acquisitions and searches for a state of being which is imperishable. This aspiration is tantamount to a desire for immortality, for the attainment of the level of the Divine Being, of identification with the Divine Lord who alone is immortal in all His glory. In seeking to rise above temporal existence, the aspirant in fact desires the eternal power which resides in the infinite

Divine Lord. For the fulfilment of this desire, the aspirant should earnestly work for the divine glory. He should no longer use his powers for personal gain or progress, for self-aggrandisement in any form, as he has hitherto done. He must take a different view of life. He must view himself as only a part of the divine scheme, as only of value in so far as his life-activities are consciously made subservient to the working out of the divine scheme. Thus working for the divine glory the aspirant will realise, and gradually evolve in himself, all the powers which make up that divine glory.

This primary law of spiritual progress presupposes certain facts as to the true nature of man and his relation to the Divine Being, which we will do well to understand. The law implies that man is inherently immortal. Though at the early stages of evolution he identifies himself with a body or bodies, he is soon forced to realise that he is more than a body which changes every moment, and that he has his real being in something which is not subject to decay. At this stage he has for teacher one who has realised that, in his essential nature, man is one with the Divine Lord, the Ruler of the universe. He knows that he is destined to grow into fellowship with Him, to be His comrade, His *sakhā*, His companion, living and having his being in the same sphere as his Lord. Man's inborn desire for infinite power and glory prompts his intense effort to realise himself and points to his essential nature as one with the Divine Lord. Aspiration is only an expression of the divine Spirit in man seeking to put forth its budding powers through the material vestures, which at first resist such expression of spiritual power through them, but ultimately yield by purification, exercise and culture.

This unity of the Spirit in man and the divine Spirit, and the relation of Spirit to matter can be fully realised after a long gradual process of growth; and those who have realised the unity in one or more aspects have given expression to their experiences. The value of these utterances varies with the level of the intellectual and spiritual attainments of the authors, who range from the ordinary saints and sages whose

experiences are recorded in the Vedas and other writings, up to the Divine Lord who deigns sometimes to speak directly to man. Thus the teaching embodied in *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, as delivered by the Divine Lord Himself, is deservedly regarded as of higher authority than even some of the Vedic utterances which have proceeded from lesser personages. The same utterance is differently interpreted by different teachers, for example, Śaṅkarācārya, Rāmānujācārya and Ānandatīrtha, who, teaching at different times, had to lay special stress on the explanation of some misunderstood portions of the Vedic religion. The utterances of the spiritually illumined authors are interpreted differently by students of different training and culture. One and the same utterance, regarded from different points of view, conveys different meanings. What an intuitive man understands in one way may be understood differently by a rationalist; and even among the rationalists who seek to interpret the utterances of sages and saints, there are differences of opinion, according to the differences in their previous training and culture, and the various points of view which the intellect, itself limited in so many ways, may take. This accounts for the many religious sects and philosophical schools, all professedly founded on the teaching of one and the same body of scriptures. Becoming aware of the different stages of spiritual and intellectual development attained by the sages and saints whose teachings are embodied in our scriptures, as also of the intellectual limitations of the commentators, we are not surprised at the existence of so many diverse sects and schools based primarily on the same body of scriptures. We seek to get at the fundamental truths and the highest ideals of life which they all inculcate and in which they all agree. But there are some in whose eyes the differences loom so large and seem so irreconcilable that they either reject even the original teaching, or adhere to one presentation of the truth while regarding all others as quite wrong.

THE THREE DEBTS

However divergent may be the views that the many sects and schools hold as to the exact nature of man's divinity, they

all agree that the seeker of immortality has to attain to unity with the Divine Lord by working in harmony with Him who is designated in the Veda as Brahmā, the Prajāpati. As a devotee of Brahman, the seeker for immortality is called a Brāhmaṇa. The first steps on the path towards immortality lie in this physical world. Man must first realise on earth that he is immortal, before he can learn to work in perfect unison with the Divine Lord and His agents ; namely, the R̥shis, Devas and Piṭṛs, who are respectively in charge of the evolution of man, spiritual, psychical and physical. He owes the present stage of his evolution to these divine agents and is therefore said to be indebted to them. The very aspiration for immortality is the result of his long evolution on this earth under the watchful care of these guardians. The Shruti, therefore, says :

जायमानो वै ब्राह्मणस्त्रिभिर्ऋणवाजायते ब्रह्मचर्येणर्षिभ्यो यज्ञेन देवेभ्यः प्रजया
पितृभ्यः ।
(*Taittīrīya-Samhitā*).

“When one has so far evolved as to become a devotee of Brahman, in three ways he becomes indebted : to R̥shis he owes Brahmacharya, to Devas he owes Yajña, to Piṭṛs he owes ‘offspring.’”

That is to say, having attained to the present stage of evolution by the help of these agencies, he must use his faculties and powers for the purpose they have in view, for the furtherance of human progress in accordance with the divine plan which they are engaged in executing. In thus co-operating with the divine agents in the execution of the divine will, man realises his unity with the Lord.

The three lines of work in which R̥shis, Devas, and Piṭṛs on earth are engaged, represent the three main aspects of the Divine Lord ; so that, by working in perfect accord with the Divine Lord and His agents in these three lines of work, man will realise on earth his unity with the Divine Being in His three-fold nature. It is said that co-operation with R̥shis consists in Brahmacharya, in Self-realisation, in the Spirit attaining mastery over the human material organism, in making the organism a ready instrument for executing the will of the Spirit in man. This represents the Shiva aspect of the Divine in man.

Co-operation with Devas consists in Yajña, in developing the powers latent in man, in getting control through them over the forces of nature, in employing them for the furtherance of evolution. This development of power and wise governance of forces represents the development of the Viṣṇu aspect of the Spirit in man. Man's co-operation with Piṭṛs lies in generating noble offspring. To discharge this function in full, he has not only to reproduce himself in his sons and daughters, he has also to hand on his spiritual knowledge and spiritual culture to the rising generation, who then constitute his spiritual offspring. This represents the Brahmā or creative aspect of the Spirit, the Love that gives and pours itself out.

BRAHMACHARYA OR SELF-REALISATION

These first three steps on the path may now be described further and in detail. The seeker after immortality desiring instruction approaches a teacher, one who has already trodden the early stages of the Path. The first thing taught to the pupil is the unity of man and the Divine Lord, in the words ; कऱसि कोनामासि "Thou art Brahman, the Indefinable ; thou art Brahman by name."

The teacher invokes on behalf of the pupil the grace of the Divine Lord and also the guardianship of all the Devas whom the teacher has been worshipping. Under the protecting care of the Divine Lord, the Devas, and the teacher himself, the aspirant treads the first step on the Path. He learns to realise the divinity of his true Self by subduing the body, by feeding it on such non-stimulating food as he is taught to give it, working the body in the way chosen by him in obedience to the teacher's command, giving it work or rest as he chooses. He also learns to subordinate his personality and all that concerns it to the will of the teacher, who in His turn works in unison with the divine will. He is to work continually, not for himself, but for the teacher who, for him, is the embodiment of the Divine Lord. Thus working in selfless devotion to the teacher, with full confidence in the divinity of his own soul, and in the grace of the Divine Lord, his mind is opened to the divine light. In the fulness of time, the teacher inspired by the

Divine Lord, or it may be the Divine Lord Himself, or some Deva, imparts to the pupil instruction as to the further steps on the Path and the way he should meditate upon and worship the Divine Lord. Such is the instruction vouchsafed to the pupil who has well imbibed the Brahmōpaḍeśha and strenuously lived the rules of Brahmacharya. When the pupil, by this kind of life in the teacher's presence, has become attuned in body and mind to the psychic and spiritual atmosphere of the teacher, he is taught mantras whereby to invoke Devas. The most important of the mantras taught to the pupil is the *Sāvitrī*, the one appropriate to the invocation of the Divine Being in the sun. Then follow other mantras appropriate to other Devas or aspects of the Divine Lord such as Prajāpati, Agni, Soma. The pupil has to assimilate each mantra or set of mantras by repeating and meditating upon it; and for the mantra to prove efficacious the neophyte should lead, during the practice, a life of strict Brahmacharya such as has been already described. This is the period of Self-realisation, the realisation, by the devotee, of the divinity of his true Self. He tries to become the master of the body, the senses, and the mind, to which he had been a slave before, or with which he had so indented himself that he was not aware of his existence apart from them.

To the observance of the rules of Brahmacharya the name *Tapas* is given: नियमेषु तपश्शब्दः. (*Āpaṣṭamba-Dharma Sūtra*, 1-5-1.) *Tapas* is derived from the root *tap*, to burn. By *Brahmacharya* fire is generated, the spark of the divine Fire in man is kindled. The fire thus kindled illumines the path of progress hitherto obscured by darkness, by spiritual blindness.

This realisation of the Self as one with the Divine Lord, the source of all power and energy, gives the devotee the strength wherewith to fight the powers of darkness that surround him on every side resisting his efforts to assert his will and attain mastery over the external forces. He is then said to have attained to the position of vantage, whence he can carry all before him in his attempts at conquest of nature. Such is the preparation for the life of the householder which is to follow. It is the same preparation for the strenuous

life of the citizen which the morning and evening meditations called Sandhyāvandana furnishes to the devotee in daily life. This is the stage on the path of spiritual progress which is symbolised by Agni-ādhāna, development of the sacred Fire, the Shiva or Will aspect of the Divine Self. He who has duly passed through this stage is invested with indomitable Will.

YAJÑA: DEVELOPMENT OF POWER

Having thus purified the body and mind, having learned the ways of invoking divine forces and applying them to divine purposes, and having developed a strong will, the devotee enters on the next stage on the path, termed Yajña or sacrifice. This consists in realising the divinity of the Self in Nature, in co-operating in the divine scheme as embodied in the world around him. He evokes the powers of his divine Self within by Yajña, by communion with Devas, and uses them in co-operation with Devas in carrying out the divine plan for world-progress. In this way the devotee develops Power, the Soma or Viṣṇu aspect of the Self in him, and realises the Self in all the forms around him.

Having thus developed Will and Power, the devotee passes on to the next stage, development of Love, the creative aspect of the Self. To this end he marries a woman who has had a similar culture, who like himself is a Brāhmaṇa, or devotee of Brahman. They unite their lives together for a common purpose. They vow to work in unison with the divine scheme of evolution, in perfect mutual trust and love. Thus united in life they work together for the furtherance of human evolution. Working consciously and strenuously in co-operation with the Divine Lord and His agents, they further their own evolution, by gradually growing into the likeness of the Divine Lord Himself.

THE LIFE OF THE HOUSEHOLDER

The life-work of the man and the woman thus united for a common purpose consists in the discharge of certain functions.

They must continue their life of Brahmacharya or Self-realisation, as before, never for a moment being off their guard. But over and above that, they have three other duties.

Firstly they must initiate worthy pupils into the life of Brahmacharya, teaching them the path of holiness which they have trodden. In doing this they are co-operating with Ṛshis whose function is the propagation of the knowledge of spiritual law, of the Path of Holiness. Secondly, they must raise worthy offspring. Keeping their bodily instincts under strict control, the married man and woman should mate together in proper season and under healthy conditions, bearing in mind the holy object of their union. The offspring of such a union will be a Ṛshi. By raising such offspring, they co-operate with the Piṭṛs whose duty it is to see that there are always suitable bodies available in which advanced souls may incarnate. Thirdly, by Yajña or communion with Devas they develop great spiritual powers which lie latent in them, and they are always ready to use those powers for the well-being of the sentient creatures around them. Their duty on this line of work does not end here. It is their duty also to teach and help others, similarly inclined, to do the same. Thus they will co-operate with the Devas in their beneficent work for the well-being of the world. In these ways, by giving and pouring itself out, the divine Self in them developes its creative or Love aspect.

According to our scriptures every devotee of Brahman must have discharged these three obligations—these three debts as they are called—before he may think of leaving this world finally. Perfection in this line of development may not be attained in one birth. So long as one feels the least attraction for the things of this world, so long as one feels that there is something left for him to do in this world, so long as the least sexual attraction lingers in the mind, it may be concluded that one is not ready for liberation from this world. Perfection in this stage of the path of holiness is marked by the realisation of oneness with Prajāpati, who regards nothing in this world as separate from Himself, who feels no separation and no attraction. When this has been reached, the Brāhmaṇa has no more to do in this world as he has no more to learn. Here ends the pravṛtti-mārga, the path of pursuit, the karma-yoga.

He is now released from all concerns of this earth. He becomes a *Samnyāsin*, and enters on the *nivṛṭṭi-mārga*, the path of renunciation. He then thinks of the Divine Being beyond this world; and his further progress lies in other worlds, where he works for the realisation of his oneness with the Divine Being. Leaving this world at death, the liberated soul continues on the path of holiness in the higher worlds. This goes on till he has realised his unity with the Supreme Lord in all regions of the universe. Then he will be absolutely free and immortal as the Supreme Lord of the universe ever is.

It will be seen from what has been said above that there are several stages of *Samnyāsa* or the life of renunciation. One is marked by entrance on the Path of Holiness. At this period the force of personality is very strong in the devotee, and his natural tendencies lead him to outward action. These forces have to be used in the right direction, turned away from a selfish career. To this end, the devotee works strenuously in all concerns of this world as before, while renouncing his personal interest in them altogether. This is what is called *karma-yoga*, the *pravṛṭṭi-mārga*, the life of renunciation in action. Steady and earnest work on this path kills the selfishness of the personality, merging the individual's interests in those of the *Prajāpati*, the Lord of the manifested world. Perfection in this course of life is attained when no vestige of personal interest of any kind in the concerns of this world is left in the devotee. Then all concerns of the earth fall away from him; he is prepared to renounce this world altogether as far as he himself is concerned. Any further interest in this world, which he may have, will be like that of the *Prajāpati*, the Lord of Creation, with whom he has attained at-one-ment. This is the renunciation which leads him beyond this world, never to return to it of necessity.

The conventional life of *Samnyāsa* or renunciation recommended in the institutes of *Varṇāśrama* for practice in the fourth period of the earthly life is more or less a formal affair. It secures freedom from certain rituals enjoined on the householder and the forest-hermit, while imposing rituals of another

and even more stringent sort. It cannot be regarded as a stage on the Path, as there is no conscious adherence to a well-understood principle underlying the course of life enjoined on the order. It has, however, its own value as a kind of life in which a man freed from all ordinary worldly duties, can pursue a life of retirement and contemplation. There are different grades in this order; the lowest grade is burdened with rituals of a complex nature, while the highest grade is freed from all formal observances and each individual is allowed to live the life of retirement almost in the manner he chooses.

What has been said of the conventional life of *Samnyāsa* applies equally to almost all the religious and socio-religious institutions of modern Hinduism. Though based primarily on lofty spiritual ideals, they have degenerated into lifeless formalities whose meaning and purpose are not known or are misunderstood. In some cases the noble Vedic ideals have during the lapse of time become distorted and have assumed unworthy and even hideous forms. It is worth our while here to trace their growth and development, as it will show their true basis and also indicate the line of reform.

MEAT AND DRINK FOREIGN TO VEDIC SACRIFICE

Animal sacrifice is the hideous form which the Vedic sacrifice has assumed by a curious course of development of ideas. One would hardly believe that the Vedic law of sacrifice could bring forth such a monster, were it not for the clear statement in the *Veḍa* as to how it has developed. It is said that at the time of *Yāga-Dikṣhā* the devotee pledges to sacrifice himself, his limited personal self and its interests, thus consecrating his life in devotion to the larger life of Spirit, Brahman, in devotion to the service of *Brahmā*, the Divine Lord, the *Prajāpati*. This is a life-long vow, and the man who cannot live up to that vow hopes to redeem himself by dedicating something he owns, such as a cow, to the service of the Lord. This is symbolised by the pouring of oblations of cow's milk into the sacred fire. At this stage of development, no idea of killing the animal is involved. The idea of redemption soon disappears and is replaced by another which leads to the slaughter of the animal. According

to the latter, the animal represents Vṛtra, the demon of darkness whom Indra, the Sacrificer, has to kill and eat, along with the officiating priests, after offering a portion to the Gods. This development of the animal sacrifice from the Vedic law of self-sacrifice is summarised as follows in the Veda :

आ सोमं वह्न्यग्निना प्रति तिष्ठते तौ संभवन्तौ यजमानमग्निं संभवतः पुरा खलु वावैष मेधायात्मानमारभ्य चरति यो दीक्षितो यदग्नीषोमीयं पशुमालभत आत्मनिष्कयण एवाख्य स तस्मात्तस्य नादयं पुरुषनिष्कयण इव ह्यथो खत्वा दुरग्नीषोमाभ्यां वा इंद्रो वृत्रमहन्निति यदग्नीषोमीयं पशुमालभते वार्त्रघ्न एवास्य स तस्माद्वाड्यम् ॥

“They bring Soma; He abides with Agni. Thus united they take hold of the devotee. At first, indeed, the devotee lives a holy life of self-sacrifice. When he offers the animal for Agni and Soma, thereby he redeems himself. Hence the animal is not to be eaten, being the man's ransom as it were. But others say: With the aid of Agni and Soma Indra killed Vṛtra; the animal-offering is the killing of Vṛtra. Hence quite fit to be eaten.” (*Taittīrīya Samhitā*, 6-1-11).

By an equally curious development of ideas and symbolism, spirituous drink has come to be associated with the Vedic sacrifices. The students of the Upaniṣads know that Agni and Soma represent Spirit and Matter, or Life and Form, aspects of Brahman. Spiritual progress, according to Vedic law, consists, as we have already seen, in first developing the Agni aspect of the Divine Self by Brahmacharya, by austerity, and then developing the Soma aspect by love and self-sacrificing activity. Soma is the vital immortal essence in all organic forms and has been symbolised by the sweet juice of a luscious plant called Soma. But the true Soma is known only to the devotees of Brahman as the Vedic Ṛshi declares :

सोमं मन्यते पपिवान् यत्सं पिबं त्योषधिम् ।

सोमं यं ब्रह्माणो विदुर्न तस्याश्नाति कश्चन ॥

“The drinker of the juice extracted from the plant thinks that is Soma; as to the Soma the Brāhmaṇas know of, nobody can ever drink it.”

The sweet beverage prepared from the genuine Soma plant was so exhilarating that the drinker exclaimed : अपाम

सोमममृता अभूमादर्शं ज्योतिरविदाम देवान् (*Taittirīya-Samhitā*, 3-2-5). "We have drunk Soma, we have become immortal, we have seen the Light, we have known Devas." This is all literally true when applied to the devotee who by love and self-sacrifice realises his own divine Self in all beings in the world. The exhilarating beverage symbolising the divine Soma used in sacrificial rituals gave place to strong, intoxicating, spirituous liquors in course of time.

The eating of meat and the drinking of liquor were not originally integral parts of the sacrificial ritual, as they have since become. For even according to modern procedure, the dressing of meat and the preparation of the drink take place after release from *Dikṣha*, the period of austerity and spiritual devotion. It would appear that the whole process of preparing, offering, and partaking of meat and drink is only a fulfilment of the obligation of the sacrificer, who should provide *madhuparka* or rich feast to the officiating priests (*R̥twiks*), as laid down in the *Gṛhya* and *Shrauta Sūtras*. Such a rich feast consisting of meat and drink must have been very eagerly welcomed by the sacrificer and the officiating priests, who, during the time of *Dikṣha*, had to live on the simplest and most meagre fare, just enough to keep the body and soul together.

The origin of animal sacrifices may be traced to another source. The *Itihāsas* and *Purāṇas* tell us that, in place of the self-sacrificing spirit, greed and sensuality became the ruling motives of worshippers when the golden age of *Āryan* evolution passed away. Then a group of blood-thirsty *Devas* came upon the earth among men and started animal sacrifices, giving them the form of Vedic sacrificial rituals, with appropriate invocations in the guise of Vedic mantras. The *Maharṣhis* protested against this, but in vain, as the spirit of the age favoured it. The greedy worshippers continued them, encouraged by the temporary gain of power and wealth which those *Devas*, propitiated by the bloody offerings, conferred upon them. Low, invisible entities of all sorts, working upon man's vicious tendencies, prompted other abominations, not fit to be mentioned, which have become associated with the Vedic system of worship. Thus the

desire for animal sacrifice arises from man's ignorance, greed and sensuousness.

THE VEDIC IDEAL OF MARRIAGE AND ITS DEGRADATION

Let us now trace the development of the modern ideal of married life and the woman's status in it. According to the Vedic ideal, marriage is the union of two souls, both intent on spiritual progress. Preferably they should be of different gotras—named after the seven R̥shis originally; they are to be, that is to say, different in religious temperament, different in the lines of their spiritual culture. A life-long union of two such persons in perfect love and harmony makes for their mutual spiritual advancement, each assimilating what is strong and characteristic in the other. This process of assimilation culminates in the realisation of oneness with Prajāpati, the chief aim of the first two āshramas—Brahmacharya and Gārhaṣṭhya—described for that reason as Prājāpatya.

According to this Vedic ideal, man and woman meet at marriage as equals and co-partners in life and maintain this relation throughout life. But this relation changes when the spiritual basis of marriage and married life is lost sight of. When this occurs, the social considerations and animal instincts rule the life; all equipment for the battle of life has reference to the acquisition of material wealth and sensual pleasure; and physical necessities solely determine the conditions of married life and the relation of the sexes. Being physically the weaker of the two, woman is dominated by man, who makes her subservient to him in all concerns of life. She is reduced to the position of a household drudge ministering to his wants, material and æsthetic. She is given such a training in early life as will fit her for this position. He has denied to her all that high intellectual and spiritual culture which would make her self-reliant, regarding that as the sole prerogative of man. He has imposed upon her many restrictions as to marriage while himself enjoys unbounded liberty in all cases. Her marriage is compulsory, effected at an age when she is more fit to be sent to school, as a rule at an age prior to the age of puberty and discretion, with the idea that she is to be a life-long pupil

of the husband in all concerns of life. She cannot marry a second time, whether the husband be alive or dead. Man, on the contrary, may marry or not, and may marry at any age, take any number of women as wives simultaneously or successively. Thus by measures of his own, man has rendered woman physically and morally weak and has made that weakness a justification for lowering her status in life.

VARṆĀSHRAMA-DHARMA, A MAN-MADE INSTITUTION

I shall now proceed to trace the development of the modern institution of caste, known under the name of *Varṇa-Vibhāga*. Varṇa, derived from *Vṛ* to seek, meaning originally the *seeker*, the seeker of fellowship with Brahman, as we have already seen. All seekers of Brahman form one people, known as Varṇa, Brāhmaṇa. Accordingly our Scriptures say that all were Brāhmaṇas at first: all the Āryans to whom the Vedic Religion was given were devotees of Brahman. The Āryan race started at first as Brāhmaṇas and even now, as said by Bhṛgu, (*Mahābhārata*, Shāntiparva, 188th Adhyāya) there is no real distinction among the Varṇas as such. For, it is the inward seeking of fellowship with Brahman which makes one a Varṇa. This inward aspiration, which leads to a life of purity, love and self-sacrifice, reacts upon the physical body, manifesting itself as spiritual lustre ब्रह्मवर्चस् in the countenance of the devotee, whatever be the colour of the skin, which varies with the climate and professional environment, ranging from white to black. This spiritual lustre is recognised by him in whom the light of the Spirit shines, and he recognises the one Varṇa among all the devotees of Brahman. The spiritual lustre escapes the notice of the unspiritual and the materialistic, who see only the colour of the skin and cannot recognise the one Varṇa.

The fourfold division of Varṇa rests, not on a spiritual basis, but on the inborn, outward tendencies of the human organism. Among the Āryans are some who by heredity and culture are fit to be teachers and priests, others who are fit to be warriors and rulers, or merchants and agriculturists, or labourers and artisans. At a certain period in Āryan history,

society needed these four classes to work in their respective fields for the common well-being; and with reference to this necessity the people were divided according to their special aptitudes. The law of spiritual progress has no immediate concern with this division; it only demands that each individual should use all his or her powers, capacities and talents, of whatever kind, in the service of the Divine Lord, for the good of the world, for the evolutionary progress of the whole sentient creation. This is the individual's Varṇa-Dharma. According to the Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa (*Bhagavad-Gītā*, XVIII, 45, 46), man attains perfection by devoting his innate capacities, whatever they may be, to the service of the Divine Lord. He makes no distinction between one man and another as to the efficiency of the work done in the service of the Lord.

The Varṇāśrama-Dharma, referring to the distinctions of Varṇa and Āśrama, is a man-made institution, the result of an adaptation of the Vedic impersonal law of spiritual progress to the special needs and conditions of the people, as devised by the leaders and teachers of a former age. The Vedic law lays down, as conditions of spiritual progress, truth, knowledge of the Vedic law, action, self-control and concentration. These accomplishments may be worked at simultaneously or in succession. Choosing the latter alternative, the leaders of the Indo-Āryan society divided man's life into four periods, each period being devoted mainly to the acquisition of one quality. Thus the knowledge of the Vedic law is to be acquired in the first or student-period; social activity in the service of the Lord is the main function of the householder's life; self-control forms the special aim of the third period when man is to retire from purely secular activities; the fourth period is devoted to a life of contemplation, concentration then being the special object of culture. Truth and other moral virtues should be cultivated in all stages of life. This is the basis of the division of the devotee's life into four āśramas or periods of special effort and culture, as treated of in the Smṛtis, such as the *Manu-smṛiti*. Varṇa-Dharma is the fulfilment of the duties of one of the āśramas, that of Grhastha, the householder. The ideal

of this stage of growth is the realisation of spiritual unity in social life. The distinctions of Varna have reference to the social functions which the individual has to discharge to the best of his ability. The choice is left to the individual himself; he chooses that department of social activity for which he is best fitted by heredity and culture. For spiritual progress one department is as good as another, provided that the department agrees with the innate characteristics of the individual and that the work is done in the service of the Lord for the good of humanity. These distinctions have no place in the other āshramas. The rules of Vānaprastha and Saṁnyāsa are the same for all. Even in the Brahmacharya-āshrama, no distinction is made in the matter of spiritual culture. Difference arises only with regard to the training required for the future profession, which is chosen according to the natural tendencies. When the Āryan social life was simple, professional training was simple also, and the choice was made by each individual himself, when he had reached the age of discretion, according to his natural tendencies. It is only when the complexity of social life has necessitated a long and special training for the several professions, and when the choice of profession has to be made in early youth before the special aptitudes have manifested themselves, that the future profession of the individual is chosen by others according to his heredity, which, it has been thought, unerringly points to his natural attributes. These are the considerations which underlie the institution of the fourfold division of Varna.

Over and above this division into separate classes, the institution of caste involves the idea of gradation and mutual exclusiveness. The gradation of classes as high and low has reference, not to the spiritual progress, but to the social value of the functions discharged by the classes. Where self-interest and personal aggrandisement are the motive powers and the measure of success in life, the more intellectual professions gain the upper hand and the classes are ranked according to the intellectual power represented by the professions. When the class-spirit rules the people, a

tendency to preserve the power gained and to increase it becomes ingrained in the minds of the people. To specialise the natural tendencies, each class marries within the circle of its own profession and each class becomes an exclusive community. Thus the Hindūs are divided into as many castes as there are professions. The process of specialisation has been carried to excess; the growth of the people has become stunted; and they have as a whole degenerated physically and morally. It is a historical fact that when the Āryans were all one people, leading a life of simplicity and high thinking, they were a virile race.

This brief sketch of the basic truths of Vedic religion and of the development of modern Hindū institutions will show in what respect the latter call for change and reform in the line of true progress. It has brought into relief the fact that the unhealthy developments in the modern institutions have been due to the dominating influence of greed, sensuality, and materialism which make for struggle and disunion. The spread of spiritual ideals of life is the panacea for all social evils, and the Theosophical Society which works in this direction has not come too soon. Let us wish god-speed to its mission and actively co-operate with it in order to bring that mission to its culmination.

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